

Fatai Ogunlayi
Vice Chair of the
Speciality Registrar Committee

Chair of DFPH Examiners
Faculty of Public Health
4 St Andrews Place London NW1 4LB

25th November 2021

Dear Dr Ward,

Re: DFPH feedback (October 2021 sitting)

Thank you for the opportunity to feed back the experiences and comments of registrars taking the Diplomate exam in October 2021. I requested feedback from all registrars who sat the exam, via their regional SRC representatives, and also via a general email request to the public health Google group. In total there were six respondents. Their feedback was collated and is presented below.

Organisation of the exam

Similar to feedback from recent sittings, the logistics and preparation leading up to the exam received high praise. Registrars cited that the exam was well organised, and appreciated the webinar organised by the Faculty. Laura Bland in particular was mentioned by multiple registrars and praised for being responsive and helpful. There were no negative comments received for the organisation of the exam.

The Invigilators and the online platform

The diplomate exam has been held on-line since November 2020 sitting and virtual invigilators are used to supervise the exams. One registrar mentioned that they had no issues with the invigilation process and were able to connect quickly to an invigilator. However, couple of registrars found the invigilation process to be inconsistent, for example not being asked to show that the whiteboard is clean at the end of each paper. One registrar in particular found the security checks challenging with invigilator apparently getting stressed when the registrar's camera that is fixed to their desktop computer was not able to pan across the entire room. This registrar also mentioned that the situation was made more stressful as the invigilator started shouting in an attempt to complete the security process.

The feedback from the registrars is that there are generally no major issues with the online platform used for the DFPH exam. The system is reported to have worked as expected. One candidate did however mentioned that they experience the application freezing but the issue was quickly resolved and another registrar mentioned that they were kicked out of the system during one of the papers (2B) but were able to re-enter with all previous work saved. The candidate thought that they might have experienced less anxiety if they knew the work would be saved automatically.

Time allocated for each exam

Only one of the respondents thought that the time allocation for each paper was about right. In November 2020 sitting, additional time was allocated to paper 2b however couple of registrars thought that paper 2b was the most time-pressured. Having to do lots of calculation and formatting tables in an online exam was mentioned as factors that appear to take-up the most time.

Couple of registrars also mentioned that they found paper 1 to be particularly challenging time-wise and whilst they appreciated that there needs to be some time pressure, the registrars mentioned that the exam seems to be much less about how much you know, and more about how quickly you can show what you know.

Paper 1

Some registrars mentioned that paper 1 did not reflect the syllabus. One registrar mentioned that vast majority of the questions in the paper could have been answered without any public health knowledge – the example given was the question about [REDACTED].

Two of the registrars mentioned that some of the questions had very weak link to the syllabus with both registrars citing the question on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] as an example. Multiple registrars mentioned that wordings of the question about [REDACTED] was confusing and could have been interpreted in a number of ways.

Similar to previous feedbacks, several registrars mentioned that given the breadth of topics in the syllabus, the questions in paper 1 appear to focus on very narrow aspect of the syllabus. Questions three and four were given as examples with both questions focusing on [REDACTED] which the registrars felt was a very small section of the syllabus. One candidate indicated that there were too many [REDACTED] questions with tenuous connections to the syllabus.

Although in previous sittings some registrars have welcomed splitting of questions into multiple parts, couple of the registrars in this sitting mentioned that this made it difficult for them to demonstrate adequate knowledge due to the very brief nature of the answers required. In addition to this, some registrars mentioned that when the question asks for a limited number of examples in the response, this made it difficult to elaborate in a way that would allow registrars to show wider knowledge especially when there is ambiguity in the question. One registrar also mentioned that in the afternoon of paper 1, there was an [REDACTED] related question ([REDACTED]) that belong in the morning exam.

Paper 2

There were generally fewer issues raised about paper 2 with some registrars stating that this paper reflects expectation and the journal article was reasonable. Two issues were raised on paper 2b. One

registrar mentioned that the online calculator was an hinderance and at times the calculator made calculations error (the example given was $1.234 * 2.345$ gave result in 9 decimal places). Another registrar mentioned that candidates should not have to memorise formulae as this does not reflect real-life practice of public health professionals and this only tests short-term memory. This viewed was echoed by several registrars on the SRC and I know this is an area that is under active consideration by the Faculty.

Other issues raised

Banking papers – Some of the registrars raised the issue of banking papers and the possibility of banking each of the four papers separately. I know this has been discussed recently at Diplomate Exams Development Committee and it might be helpful to outline the current position of the Faculty in response to this letter.

Past papers – Registrars also mentioned that the specimen / past papers that are available online on the FPH website for paper 1 are more similar to the old style long essay questions and a more appropriate sample papers that reflect new style of questions (with several sub-parts) would enable candidates to best prepare for the examinations.

Syllabus – Some of the registrars mentioned that the size and scale of what the syllabus covers was unreasonable and that it appears that the exam was designed to test those with good memories (to remember frameworks, theories, formulae etc) rather than test key public health skills.

Wellbeing – Couple of the registrars mentioned that the whole experience of undertaking the DFPH exams was very stressful, and impacted negatively on their mental health, wellbeing and family lives. The registrars indicated that impact was made worse with the on-going pandemic especially for those with caring responsibilities and would like the Faculty to consider the support it is providing to its registrars in terms of mental and wellbeing support.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions regarding any of the points raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely,



Fatai Ogunlayi
Vice Chair of the SRC
On behalf of the SRC